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New York

President:	Sir Emyr Jones Parry	(United Kingdom)
Members:	Algeria	Mr. Baali
	Angola	Mr. Lucas
	Benin	Mr. Adechi
	Brazil	Mr. Valle
	Chile	Mr. Muñoz
	China	Mr. Wang Guangya
	France	Mr. De La Sablière
	Germany	Mr. Pleuger
	Pakistan	Mr. Akram
	Philippines	Mr. Baja
	Romania	Mr. Dumitru
	Russian Federation	Mr. Dolgov
	Spain	Mr. Yáñez-Barnuevo
	United States of America	Ms. Williamson

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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04-56677 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President: In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

It is so decided.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Security Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

We will now hear a briefing by Mr. Kieran Prendergast, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

Mr. Prendergast: It pains me to have to say yet again that there is little positive and much that is negative to report to the Security Council this month. Violence, not negotiation, continues to be the all-too-frequent mode of communication in the Middle East. There is a palpable sense of drift and foreboding — in the case of the occupied Palestinian territory, drift towards chaos. Neither side is fulfilling its obligations under the road map.

A major Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip has resulted in the deaths of large numbers of Palestinians, including civilians and children. The Secretary-General has expressed his deep concern over those deaths and has reminded Israel that it must act in keeping with its obligations under international humanitarian law.

The terrorist attacks at Taba, Egypt, in the Sinai on the evening of 7 October were breaches of the peace in a place hitherto known as a haven for coexistence and tourism. The casualties reflect the diversity of nationalities mingling at Taba — at least 13 Israelis, six Egyptians and six Russian and Italian tourists were killed in the triple bombing.

Since my last briefing to the Council just over a month ago, 206 Palestinians and 13 Israelis have been killed and approximately 1,033 Palestinians and 62 Israelis have been injured. The number of Palestinians killed since September 2000 is now 3,839. A total of 979 Israelis have been killed over the same period. An estimated 36,433 Palestinians and 6,297 Israelis have been injured since the eruption of the intifada. Those statistics are staggering. They ought to give all of us food for thought. Are we going to go on like this? Is there not a better way?

Violence in and around the Gaza Strip sharply escalated during the reporting period. On 29 September, Qassam rockets fired from Gaza at the town of Sderot inside Israel killed two children, aged two and four. Throughout the past month, Palestinian militants continued to fire Qassam rockets at Sderot, causing minor injuries as well as damage to homes and infrastructure. The Palestinian Authority must make all efforts to stop such attacks against Israeli civilians.

In that context, on 30 September, Israel launched a major military operation in the northern Gaza Strip. A large contingent of Israeli troops entered Beit Lahiya, Beit Hanoun and the Jabaliya refugee camp. On 30 September alone, at least 35 Palestinians were killed. Seventy-two Palestinians, ranging in age from 10 to 60, were wounded by gunfire in the Jabaliya camp that day, according to hospital officials. By 15 October, when Israeli troops started redeploying, 135 Palestinians had been killed in Gaza, 114 of them in the northern part of the Strip. Some 512 Palestinians had been injured, 431 of them in northern Gaza. During the operation, on average, eight Palestinians were killed every day and 30 injured.

Many of the victims were civilians, a number of them children; at least 34 children were reported dead by 15 October. Approximately 170 children aged 18 or under had been injured. On 5 October, a 13-year-old girl died close to her school, hit by 20 bullets. On 12 October, an eleven-year-old Palestinian girl was shot and mortally injured in a United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) school in an incident reminiscent of last month's events, when a ten-year-old girl was shot in an UNRWA school classroom, also dying later from her injuries. We reiterate our call on the Government of Israel to respect its legal obligations to ensure the safety of Palestinian civilians and to refrain from the disproportionate use of force.

We also continue to be gravely concerned at the extensive destruction of civilian property, infrastructure and agricultural land in the northern Gaza Strip during the operation. Such destruction yet again raises concerns about collective punishment and helps to fuel the bloodshed.

Israel carried out a number of targeted assassinations over the past month. The Israeli human rights group B'Tselem estimates that, even before those latest extra-judicial killings, more than 150 militants had been killed in targeted assassinations by Israel since September 2000. More than 100 bystanders have been killed in such strikes. We repeat our call on the Government of Israel to halt immediately the illegal practice of extra-judicial killings and to refrain from such use of force in densely populated areas, where there is a high risk of so-called collateral damage.

At the same time, the Palestinian Authority must take decisive steps to quell the terror emanating from territory under its control. On 22 September, two Israeli border policemen were killed and some 15 Israelis wounded when an eighteen-year-old suicide bomber detonated her explosives at a busy bus stop in northern Jerusalem. The Palestinian Authority must bring those implicated in terrorist acts to justice. The Palestinian Authority must fulfil its obligations under the road map, as well as under international law, to do its utmost to prevent such attacks.

Over the past month, there has been further violence and bloodshed in the West Bank as well. Of particular concern has been the growing number of violent acts committed by Israeli settlers. We call on the Government of Israel to exert its legal authority over Israeli settlers and to bring to justice those who commit crimes against Palestinians and civilians from third countries.

United Nations agencies continue to be severely affected in their operations by Israeli restrictions on movement. During the reporting period, UNRWA was forced to suspend many of its normal operations, including the resumption of much-needed emergency food aid in the Gaza Strip. With few exceptions, since 21 September, Israeli forces have denied United Nations personnel secure and unimpeded access into Gaza, hindering the effective delivery of humanitarian aid. We reiterate our call on the Government of Israel to guarantee United Nations personnel freedom of movement and to ensure unrestricted access and the free movement of humanitarian goods and personnel into and throughout the Gaza Strip.

However, as I told the Council in my last briefing, Palestinian civilians suffer most under the movement restrictions. The full closure imposed by the Israeli authorities on the West Bank and Gaza Strip on 8 September for the Jewish high holidays remains in effect today, with no Palestinian movement at all between the occupied Palestinian territory and Israel. In addition, Palestinian men between the ages of 16 and 35 continue to be forbidden from using the Rafah terminal to Egypt — the only passage for Gazans who need to travel outside the Gaza Strip — even if they have medical documentation referring them for necessary treatment abroad.

The economy remains in tatters. Since its revitalization is crucial for the future, that remains a primary concern of the donor community, which is planning to meet later this year to discuss how best to support the Palestinian economy. Movement restrictions increased substantially during 2004. Unemployment in Gaza and in the West Bank remains high. Poverty is predicted to rise further. Food security, health standards, quality of water and sanitation, and education standards have all deteriorated.

Israel continues its policies of demolishing houses — with 166 homes destroyed since my last briefing — and of confiscating and/or levelling Palestinian land for the construction of the barrier, construction of which continues, especially around Jerusalem. We reiterate our call on Israel to abide by its legal obligations as set forth in the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice and General Assembly resolution ES-10/15, which acknowledged the opinion and demanded that Israel comply with its legal obligations.

The Secretary-General will, within the week, send to the President of the General Assembly a letter outlining the structure and planned activities of the register of damages caused by the construction of the barrier, as called for in resolution ES-10/15. His aim will be to establish, as soon as possible, a body that will be able to examine requests and eligibility for registration, as well as to verify the facts and extent of damage and of the causal link between the construction of the barrier and the damage sustained.

I would like to say a word about peace. Even to speak in terms of a peace process seems to put one at a

distance from the present reality. Yet it remains the case that the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians can be settled only through negotiations between the parties. In the continued absence of such negotiations, the road map offers the only way forward. Implementation of the road map, which was endorsed by the Security Council in resolution 1515 (2003), would help both parties to find their way back to the negotiating table at long last.

However, here too I can offer no comfort to the Council. The Government of Israel has still not implemented its obligation to dismantle settlement outposts erected since March 2001 and to impose a settlement freeze, including as a result of natural growth, in full consistency with the road map and the Mitchell report. As the Quartet recently stated, that lack of action is a cause for concern. During 2002 and 2003, West Bank and Gaza Strip settlements received at least twice as much financial aid from the Israeli Ministry of the Interior as did other Jewish communities. Our concerns over the Government's lack of action to freeze settlements are intensified by reports that the first settlement outpost in the Gaza Strip was established recently, and that the number of new apartments sold in the West Bank and Gaza Strip rose by more than 20 per cent in the first seven months of 2004, compared to the same period during 2003. We call on Israel to meet its obligations under international law and under the road map.

For its part, the Palestinian Authority needs to take genuine, determined and sustained action to ensure that an empowered Prime Minister and cabinet can fulfil Palestinian obligations under the road map, in particular as regards an end to violence and terrorism and the reform of its security forces.

Internal unrest continues in the occupied Palestinian territory. On 12 October, military intelligence chief Moussa Arafat escaped unharmed from a car bombing against his convoy in Gaza. On 18 October, six security officials were injured, one of them seriously, as gunfights erupted between members of rival Palestinian factions. The growing number of incidents indicates that militants are increasingly bold in challenging the Palestinian Authority.

On 14 October, Palestinian Prime Minister Abu Alaa was quoted in the press as stating:

> "The security services cannot stop the chaos. There are internal problems and murders and assassination attempts and, unfortunately, until now we have not been able to control this situation, and that places a very heavy responsibility on us. The situation requires unifying all security forces through a clear and determined decision and issuing specific and clear orders".

We reiterate our call on President Arafat to move forward on the implementation of much-needed reforms. Such reform is needed not only in the security services, which have to be consolidated and should report to an empowered Interior Minister under the oversight of an effective Prime Minister, but also in other fields where reform legislation is awaiting approval by the President.

In that context, we continue to support the steps to prepare for Palestinian elections. The voter registration effort recently ended, after being extended due to the low turnout of voters and Israeli military operations. By 13 October, a total of 64.7 per cent of eligible voters in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, not including East Jerusalem, had registered.

Regrettably, Israeli movement restrictions have prevented the Central Election Commission from bringing the completed registration rolls from Gaza to its headquarters in the West Bank safely and without interference. We again urge Israel and the Palestinian Authority to cooperate towards the goal of conducting a free and credible electoral process.

At the convening of the Knesset for its winter session on 11 October, Prime Minister Sharon stated that "Israel adheres to its support of the road map, which is the only plan to enable progress towards a viable political agreement". One hopes that this statement, and not earlier reported remarks by Mr. Sharon and his associates with very different connotations, represents Israeli policy. Mr. Sharon's withdrawal initiative is now scheduled to enter the legislative process in the Knesset on 25 October, with the first reading of the related bill on the compensation package for evacuated settlers to follow on 3 November.

As the Council has been informed in successive briefings, the manner and context in which the Israeli pullout from Gaza and the northern West Bank takes place are extremely important. As the Quartet recently reiterated following its meeting in New York on 22 September, withdrawal from Gaza should be full and complete and should be undertaken in a manner

consistent with the road map. If those requirements were met, withdrawal could be a useful step towards an end to the Israeli occupation that began in 1967, by means of direct negotiations between the parties leading to the goal of two States — Israel, and a sovereign, independent, viable, democratic and territorially contiguous Palestine — living side by side in peace and security. That remains the goal. We urge the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority to coordinate closely preparation and implementation of the withdrawal initiative.

The Quartet expressed its deep appreciation and support for Egypt's efforts to help reform and rebuild Palestinian security services, to reach a comprehensive and lasting end to all violence and to advance the goal of security, stability and prosperity in Gaza as withdrawal is implemented. In that context, the Quartet also called on all concerned parties to engage constructively on economic aspects of Gaza and West Bank withdrawal. The postponed meeting of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, the prime donor coordination body, is planned to take place later in the year, and we hope it will yield tangible results in terms of alleviating the deep economic and humanitarian crisis confronting the Palestinian Authority.

Turning to the situation in southern Lebanon, we see that relative calm has prevailed along the Blue Line for just over three months. The only serious violations to have taken place during this period have come in the form of Israeli overflights. On 21 September, nine air violations involving 16 jets were recorded. On 11 October, a total of 12 air violations took place, causing sonic booms in various parts of Lebanon. Further air violations occurred on 18 and 19 October. We call on the Government of Israel to cease these violations of the Blue Line.

Despite the overall calm, certain events have served as a reminder of the continuing potential for instability. Within the area of operation of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), on 9 September, according to Lebanese security sources, unidentified armed elements fired one rocket from the Yaroun valley area in the general direction of Israel. The rocket, which apparently malfunctioned, landed well on the Lebanese side of the Blue Line. Lebanese authorities arrested the armed elements in question, who were reported to have had another two rockets in their possession. We commend the quick action by the Government of Lebanon and continue to urge it to exert full control over the use of force on its entire territory and to prevent all attacks from Lebanon across the Blue Line.

There have been incidents outside UNIFIL's area of operation that relate to the overall security situation. Most worrying, on 1 October, a car bomb in Beirut targeted former Minister Marwan Hamadeh's car, killing one person and injuring two, including Mr. Hamadeh. The Secretary-General issued a statement that expressed his serious concern over the incident and reiterated his abhorrence of such violent acts.

Also in relation to Lebanon, the Secretary-General has received a mandate from the Council to report to members every six months, and of course he will do so.

I regret to report again that no progress has been achieved on the Syrian-Israeli track. As I have mentioned in previous briefings, President Bashar Al-Assad has stated on a number of occasions that he stands ready to re-engage in peace negotiations with Israel. Little has come of these openings. Nevertheless, the resumption and completion of peace negotiations between Israel and Syria and the implementation of resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) are indispensable ingredients of a just, lasting and comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

At the start of this briefing, I spoke of a palpable sense of drift and foreboding. This stems from an equally pervasive sense of pessimism about the prospects in the Middle East, coupled with frustration, because the basis of a settlement — the two-State solution — is well established and enjoys strong support among both the Israeli and Palestinian publics. One hears from many quarters the argument that the time has come for a renewed commitment and effort, but that the parties cannot succeed if left to themselves. The international community's more vigorous engagement is, therefore, a vital ingredient if we want to end the violence and bring fresh hope of peace in the Middle East.

The President: I thank Mr. Prendergast for his comprehensive briefing.

Now, in accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I would like to invite Council members to informal consultations to continue discussion of this subject.

The meeting rose at 10.40 a.m.